



**DISABILITY THRIVE INITIATIVE**

*Alternative Services and Supports for the IDD Community*

# **INTRODUCTION TO PLAIN LANGUAGE**

**SEPTEMBER 24, 2021**



# WHAT IS PLAIN LANGUAGE?



- Plain language is communication that your readers can understand the first time they read it.
- They can:
  1. Find what they need
  2. Understand what they find
  3. Use what they find to meet their needs

*Introduction to Plain Language* (n.d.) Plain Language; Official DoD Plain Language Website <https://www.usna.edu/HRO/files/documents/Public%20-%20Docs/Training/Plain%20Language%20Training.pdf>

# EXAMPLE OF PLAIN LANGUAGE



- Have you read something like this before?
  - The dietary guidelines for Americans recommends a half hour or more of moderate physical activity on most days, preferably every day. The activity can include brisk walking, calisthenics, home care, gardening, moderate sports exercise, and dancing.
- The same information in plain language :
  - Do at least 30 minutes of exercise, like dancing, most days of the week.



Image Source:  
[https://communicatehealth.com/page/39/?sort=search\\_api\\_relevance&order=desc&f%5B0%5D=field\\_product%25253Afield\\_photo\\_tags%253A1626&f%5B1%5D=field\\_product%25253Afield\\_photo\\_addtl\\_categories%253A956](https://communicatehealth.com/page/39/?sort=search_api_relevance&order=desc&f%5B0%5D=field_product%25253Afield_photo_tags%253A1626&f%5B1%5D=field_product%25253Afield_photo_addtl_categories%253A956)

# WHY IS PLAIN LANGUAGE IMPORTANT?



- Plain Language
  - It is a civil right.
  - Supports informed decision making.
  - It is part of universal design.
  - Offers clarity and credibility.
  - It is the law for state and federal agencies.

**Disability  
Rights are  
Human  
Rights**

# WHAT PLAIN LANGUAGE IS AND IS NOT...



## Plain Language Is ...

1. Writing for your audience
2. Organizing your writing
3. Shortening paragraphs and sentences
4. Simplifying word choices
5. Using lists

## Plain Language Is Not ...

1. Writing less precisely
2. "Dumbing down" or using playful language or baby talk
3. Attempting to be folksy or too informal
4. Leaving out necessary technical or legal terms

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# 5 STEPS TO PLAIN LANGUAGE

1. Audience & Purpose
2. Structure
3. Design
4. Expression
5. Evaluation

*What is plain language?* (n.d.) Plain Language Association International. <https://plainlanguagenetwork.org/plain-language/what-is-plain-language>



# STEP 1: AUDIENCE & PURPOSE

1

# IT'S ABOUT THE AUDIENCE, NOT THE WRITER



- Instead of thinking:
  - “What do I want to say?”
  - “How can I impress my readers?”
- Consider asking:
  - “Who is my audience?”
  - “What do they need to know?”
  - “What do they already know about the subject?”
  - “How can I communicate what my readers need to know?”
  - “What questions will they have?”

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# USING "WE" AND "YOU"

- "We" and "you" can make your sentences more straightforward and help your readers feel you are speaking directly to them.
- Five Guidelines:
  - Use "we" or "our" to refer to your agency
  - Use "you" for the reader
  - Use "you" instead of "he or she" to reduce awkwardness and write to the individual.
  - If using "you" to address more than one audience, write separate messages to each audience
  - Don't use "we" if you are referring readers to more than one organization

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# EXAMPLE OF USING "WE" AND "YOU"



## Before:

- During the COVID 19 pandemic, ADS, Inc. will continue to provide Adult Day Services for the individuals utilizing their services through several alternative service options. Each person will have the choice to plan and customize the frequency and duration of his or her weekly programming. They can do so by utilizing all, none, or any combination of these options. Also, he or she can customize with ideas and options of their own creation.

## After:

- We will continue to provide alternative service options for you during the COVID 19 pandemic. You will have the choice to plan and customize your weekly programming using any combination of options, including your own ideas.

# AUDIENCE EXERCISE

## EJERCICIO PARA EL AUDIENCIA



### Topic: Voting

- Who is your audience?
- What do they already know?
- What do they need to know?
- What questions will they have?

### Tema: Votación

- ¿Quién es tu audiencia?
- ¿Qué saben ya?
- ¿Qué necesitan saber?
- ¿Qué preguntas tendrán?

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## **STEP 2: STRUCTURE**

2

# WHAT STRUCTURE TO USE?



- To select the right structure for a communication, ask yourself:
  - What are the common structures used for this type of communication?
  - What structures will readers be familiar with?
  - What sequence will be logical and easy for readers to navigate?

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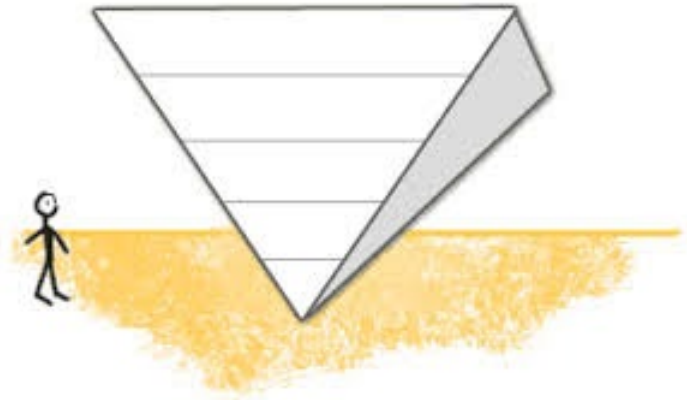


# ORGANIZATION



- Chronological Order

- Use chronological order for instructions.
- Present the steps in the order they need to happen.



- Reverse Pyramid

- Use this style when explaining something or writing a report.
- Provide overview or summary first. Followed by the details or examples.

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[https://www.usna.edu/HRO/\\_files/documents/Public%20-%20Docs/Training/Plain%20Language%20Training.pdf](https://www.usna.edu/HRO/_files/documents/Public%20-%20Docs/Training/Plain%20Language%20Training.pdf)

# STRUCTURE EXAMPLE



## Reverse Pyramid

- There are several guidelines you can follow to create a plain language document. The first is knowing and writing for your audience. Next, you should use a structure that makes sense for what your audience needs to know. Then design your document in a way that makes the information easy to find. You will want to make sure you are expressing yourself in a way your reader understands. Finally, proof-read your document.

# **STRUCTURE EXERCISE**

## **EJERCICIO DE ESTRUCTURA**



**Which organization structure best communicates what your audience needs to know?**

- Chronological Order
- Reverse Pyramid

**¿Qué estructura organizativa comunica mejor lo que su audiencia necesita saber?**

- Orden cronológico
- Pirámide inversa



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## **STEP 3: DESIGN**

3

# SHORT SECTIONS & HEADINGS



## Short Sections

- Break up large blocks of text into smaller sections and use a heading to indicate a new section.
- Readers:
  - Tend to skip over large passages of text
  - Get lost in long paragraphs
  - May be intimidated by dense blocks of text

## Headings

- Clear and frequent headings allow the reader to move through a document and find needed information quickly.
  - Your reader might be looking to answer a specific question or concern.
  - Your reader may want to browse a document for an overview of the content.

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# HEADING EXAMPLE

## h1 Taking Care of Your Cat

Integer posuere erat a ante venenatis dapibus posuere velit aliquet. Nunc id dolor id nibh ultricies vehicula ut id elit. Donec sed odio dui. Fusce dapibus, tellus ac cursus commodo, tortor mauris condimentum nibh, ut fermentum massa justo sit amet risus. Praesent commodo cursus magna, vel scelerisque nisl consectetur et. Maecenas sed diam eget risus varius blandit sit amet non magna. Vivamus sagittis lacus vel augue laoreet rutrum faucibus dolor auctor. Donec sed odio dui.

## h2 Nutrition

Nullam id dolor id nibh ultricies vehicula ut id elit. Donec sed odio dui. Fusce dapibus, tellus ac cursus commodo, tortor mauris condimentum nibh, ut fermentum massa justo sit amet risus. Praesent commodo cursus magna, vel scelerisque nisl consectetur et. Maecenas sed diam eget risus varius blandit sit amet non magna. Vivamus sagittis lacus vel augue laoreet rutrum faucibus dolor auctor. Donec sed odio dui.

### h3 Water

Praesent commodo cursus magna, vel scelerisque nisl consectetur et. Maecenas sed diam eget risus varius blandit sit amet non magna. Cum sociis natoque penatibus et magnis dis parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus. Aenean eu leo quam. Pellentesque ornare sem lacinia quam venenatis vestibulum. Cras mattis consectetur purus sit amet fermentum.

### h3 Food

Etiam porta sem malesuada magna mollis euismod. Praesent commodo cursus magna, vel scelerisque nisl consectetur et. Vivamus sagittis lacus vel augue laoreet rutrum faucibus dolor auctor. Nullam quis risus eget urna mollis ornare vel eu leo. Duis mollis, est non commodo luctus, nisi erat porttitor ligula, eget lacina odio sem nec elit. Morbi leo risus, porta ac consectetur ac, vestibulum at eros. Aenean lacinia bibendum nulla sed consectetur.

#### h4 Dry food

Maecenas faucibus mollis interdum. Duis mollis, est non commodo luctus, nisi erat porttitor ligula, eget lacina odio sem nec elit. Donec sed odio dui. Cum sociis natoque penatibus et magnis dis parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus. Aenean lacinia bibendum nulla sed consectetur. Nullam id dolor id nibh ultricies vehicula ut id elit.

#### h4 Wet food

Donec id elit non mi porta gravida at eget metus. Maecenas faucibus mollis interdum. Vestibulum id ligula porta felis euismod semper. Nullam id dolor id nibh ultricies vehicula ut id elit.

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# ACCESSIBILITY



The visual appearance of a communication is just as important as the structure and language.

- Layout and margins include plenty of white space to separate different parts of the text.
- Font and type size is easy to read.
- Plenty of contrast between the text and the background.
- Spacing between lines and paragraphs.

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# VISUALS

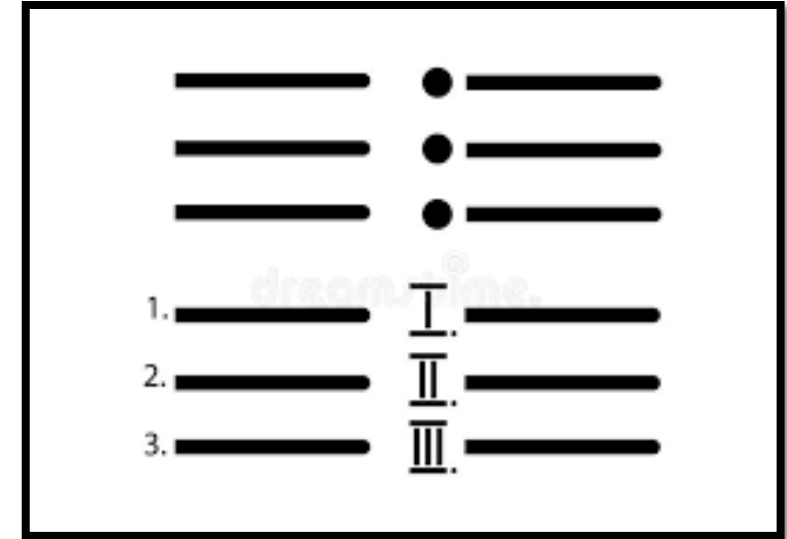


- Meaningful visuals:

- Tables or charts
- Diagrams
- Photos
- Bulleted or numbered lists

- Lists:

- Use a lead-in sentence to explain your list.
- Keep lists to 7 items maximum.
  - If you have more items, separate into 2 or more shorter lists, each with its own lead-in sentence.



*What is plain language?* (n.d.) Plain Language Association International. <https://plainlanguagenetwork.org/plain-language/what-is-plain-language>

# VISUALS EXAMPLE



Follow these six steps every time you wash your hands:

1. Open the tap and wet your hands with clean running water (warm or cold).
2. Apply a quarter sized amount of soap to your hands.
3. Begin to lather soap on both palms, back of hand, in between fingers and under the nails.
4. Count for 20 seconds, or sing the alphabet to allow the soap to wipe all bacteria from your hands.
5. After 20 seconds rinse hands of all soap with the water.
6. Finally use a clean towel to dry off hands.

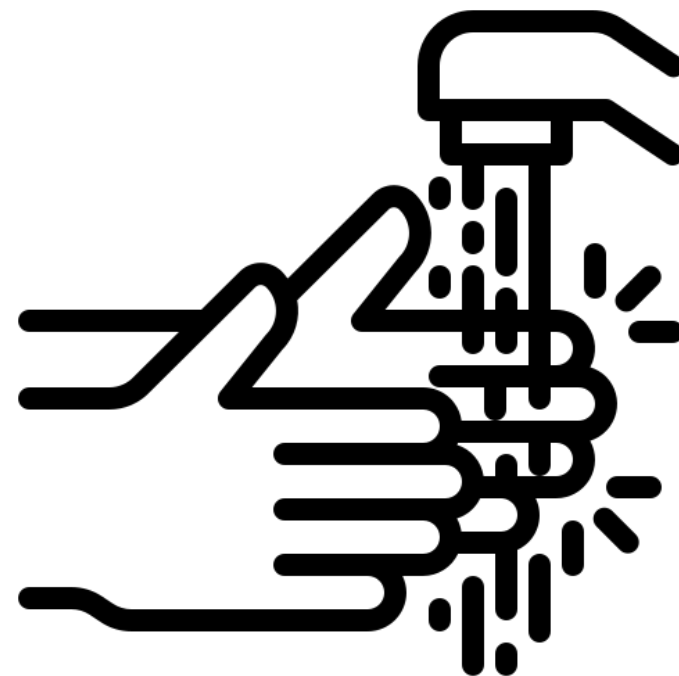


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# DESIGN EXERCISE

## EJERCICIO DE DISEÑO



### What design elements can you use in your voting communication?

Think of design elements that help your audience find the information they need.

- What sections and headings will you use?
- What visuals or lists will you use?

### ¿Qué elementos de diseño puedes usar en tu comunicación de votación?

Piense en elementos de diseño que ayuden a su audiencia a encontrar la información que necesitan.

- ¿Qué secciones y encabezados utilizará?
- ¿Qué elementos visuales o listas usarás?

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# STEP 4: EXPRESSION

4

# PARAGRAPHS



To make your paragraphs easy to read and navigate, here are four guidelines:

1. Make each paragraph short, typically fewer than 7 lines of text.
2. Have only one topic in each paragraph.
3. Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence that announces the contents of the paragraph.
4. Link your paragraphs with transition words (e.g., first, second, in contrast, however, also)

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# SENTENCES



- Write in short sentences, usually fewer than 20 words per sentence.
  - Short sentences break complex information into easier-to-process chunks.
- Active voice is more clear, concise, and direct. To write in the active voice, tell your reader who does what - in that order.
  - Passive voice can disguise who does what.
- Zombies Test: If you can add “by zombies” at the end of the sentence (and it still makes sense) it is in passive voice.
  - Passive: A report will be submitted... “by zombies.”
  - Active: We will submit a report.

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<https://www.usna.edu/HRO/files/documents/Public%20-%20Docs/Training/Plain%20Language%20Training.pdf>

# WORDS



Get rid of excess words.

- Reread what you wrote and see if you can say the same thing with fewer words.
- Remove pretentious words from your writing.

Limit acronyms and jargon and define technical terms.

- It's your work, so those words make sense to you.
- To an outside reader, jargon, acronyms, and technical terms interfere with understanding your message.

Avoid Hidden Verbs

- Hidden verbs are verbs disguised as noun phrases.
- Examples:
  - Replace "do an assessment" with "assess."
  - Replace "provide assistance" with "help" or "assist."

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# EXPRESSION EXAMPLE



*tests*  
If your ~~initial screening evaluation~~ *show* indicates you have  
*high blood pressure* ~~hypertension~~, you will ~~be asked~~ *ask you* to participate *be in* in the second  
*part* ~~phase~~ of this ~~research investigation~~ *we study*. The investigation *Our goal is*  
aims to ~~examine~~ *test* a new medication that may ~~prevent~~  
*heart* ~~cardiovascular~~ disease. *help keep some people from getting*



# **EXPRESSION EXERCISE**

## **EJERCICIO DE EXPRESIÓN**



**Create a topic sentence for your voting communication, or improve this sentence:**

Registering to vote online is not that difficult as long as the person meets all of the eligibility requirements, has proof of the required documentation, and has a decent internet connection.

Remember to follow these guidelines:

- One topic
- Short sentence, less than 20 words
- Get rid of excessive words
- Active voice (no zombies)
- Limit acronyms, jargon, and technical terms.

**Cree una oración temática para su comunicación de votación o mejore esta oración:**

Registrarse para votar por internet no es tan difícil siempre y cuando la persona cumpla con todos los requisitos de elegibilidad, tenga prueba de la documentación requerida y tenga una conexión a Internet decente.

Recuerde seguir estas pautas:

- Un tema
- Oración corta, menos de 20 palabras
- Deshágase de las palabras excesivas
- Voz activa (sin zombies)
- Limitar acrónimos, jerga y definir términos técnicos.

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# **STEP 5: EVALUATION**

5

# CHECK FOR READER COMPREHENSION



- Proofread
  - Use the grammar and spell-checking features.
  - Then, look for errors the checking features commonly miss (e.g., "plan writing" instead of "plain writing").
  - Look for inconsistencies, wordiness, jargon, etc.
  - Read your document aloud if that helps you catch errors.
- Get someone outside your work group to read your writing.
  - You and your colleagues understand the subject of your writing. Someone outside your work group can more easily show you where others will be confused.

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# PREVIEW YOUR LAYOUT



As a final step, examine how the document will appear to your reader using these four questions.

1. Did you use visual elements such as bullets, underline, bold, italics, or color to draw the reader's attention to important points?
2. Did you use white space to separate ideas or topics?
3. Were you consistent in your design and style? For example, if one main heading is 14-point or dark green, all should be that way.
4. Are your headings informative enough for the reader to know what will be in the next section?

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# EXAMPLE



# **EVALUATION EXERCISE**

## **EJERCICIO DE EVALUACIÓN**

### **Voting Communication Proof-Reading**

To validate that a person is registered to vote in the forthcoming election, check his or her voter registration status on the CA SOS website. This person will also be able to verify his or her polling location. And can find out if he or she specified D, R, I, or other political party.



### **Corrección de pruebas de comunicación de votación**

Para validar que una persona está registrada para votar en las próximas elecciones, verifique su estado de registro de votantes en el sitio web de CA SOS. Esta persona también podrá verificar su lugar de votación y puede averiguar si especificó D, R, I u otro partido político.

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# RESOURCES

# RESOURCES: WEBSITES (1 OF 2)



## Plain Language Association International

- Plain Language Association International (PLAIN) is the international association for plain language supporters and practitioners around the world.

[Plain Language Association International](https://plainlanguagenetwork.org/)

<https://plainlanguagenetwork.org/>



## Center for Plain Language

- This non-profit's site highlights the importance of plain language and includes a toolkit for starting a plain language plan in your organization.

[Center for Plain Language](https://centerforplainlanguage.org/)

<https://centerforplainlanguage.org/>



# RESOURCES: WEBSITES (2 OF 2)



## U.S. Government: Plain Language

This extensive website is the official Plain Language site. It includes five items:

- 1. Links to the Plain Writing Act and related Executive Orders
- 2. Guidance materials to help agencies comply with the law
- 3. Guidelines and examples for writers and editors
- 4. Information about free plain language training
- 5. Tips and tools related to plain language.

[plainlanguage.gov](https://plainlanguage.gov)

<https://plainlanguage.gov/>

## Official Department of Defense Plain Language Website

- Training courses, writing guides, and instructional videos

[DoD Plain Language](https://www.esd.whs.mil/dd/plainlanguage/)

<https://www.esd.whs.mil/dd/plainlanguage/>

# RESOURCES VIDEOS



## Disability Rights California Plain Language Communication

- Plain Language Training 2021

[Disability Rights CA Plain Language Training](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72kVg6G0kk0)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72kVg6G0kk0>



U.S. Citizenship  
and Immigration  
Services

## U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services: Plain Language

- USCIS is dedicated to improving how we communicate with the public. We created several writing tips videos to help our employees improve the clarity of USCIS communications.

[USCIS Plain Language Videos](https://www.uscis.gov/about-us/uscis-plain-language)

<https://www.uscis.gov/about-us/uscis-plain-language>

# RESOURCES APPS



grammarly

- Great Writing, Simplified
- Compose bold, clear, mistake-free writing with Grammarly's AI-powered writing assistant.

[grammarly](https://www.grammarly.com/)

<https://www.grammarly.com/>

**Hemingway**  
*Editor*

Hemingway App

- Hemingway App makes your writing bold and clear.

[Hemingway Editor](https://hemingwayapp.com)

[hemingwayapp.com](https://hemingwayapp.com)

# RECURSOS EN ESPAÑOL (1 DE 3)



## Manual de Lenguaje Claro

<https://funcionpublica.gob.mx/web/doctos/temas/programas/ManualLenguajeClaro.pdf>

Herramienta para escribir en Lenguaje Simple con ejemplos de palabras y oraciones.



## Lenguaje Sencillo - Consejos De Disability Rights California

<https://emmresourcecenter.org/system/files/2017-10/Using-Plain-Language-Fact-Sheet-Spanish.pdf>

Por que es importante el Lenguaje Sencillo y recursos gratuitos en linea.

# RECURSOS EN ESPAÑOL (2 DE 3)



## Documentos Accesibles Para Todos

[https://youtu.be/\\_ZfieumSSuA](https://youtu.be/_ZfieumSSuA)

Taller en español sobre el Lenguaje Simple y por que es esencial para TODOS.



## La Accesibilidad Web es un Derecho

<https://youtu.be/kEdcfOlJeNc>

La accesibilidad digital a proveido libertad para elegir su plan de vida, aumentado la independendencia y el acceso a trabajos. La accesibilidad tambien apoya y promueve la igualdad de derechos.

# RECURSOS EN ESPAÑOL (3 DE 3)



Argentina.gob.ar

## Lenguaje Simple

<https://www.argentina.gob.ar/contenidosdigitales/comunicar/lenguaje>

Diseño para el Lenguaje Simple fácil de leer y con recursos a diccionarios en español.



PUEDA

<https://accesibilidad-digital.adc.org.ar/pueda.html>

Iniciativa para difundir conceptos claves y buenas practicas de la accesibilidad digital. Accediendo servicios de informacion para TODOS.

# THANK YOU!



**DISABILITY THRIVE INITIATIVE**  
*Alternative Services and Supports for the IDD Community*

We look forward to seeing you at future webinars.

Find this webinar and other resources at:

[DisabilityThriveInitiative.org](https://DisabilityThriveInitiative.org)

[Info@DisabilityThriveInitiative.org](mailto:Info@DisabilityThriveInitiative.org) | (916) 238-8811